The Last Days of The Regime

THE LAST MEETING WITH MUSSOLINI

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At noon on April 25, Father Marinelli of the Barnabites and Professor Stocchetti sent to me Mr. Bruni, the husband of a lady of the Belgiojoso family and at that time employed at the Prefecture of Milan. He had been charged with informing me that at 3 p.m. Mussolini would come to see me (1) and therefore wished me to arrange for him to meet General Cadorna and Mr. Marazza.

At the appointed hour, the Duce arrived. He was immediately admitted and accompanied by the secretaries. He entered the reception room with a face so utterly drawn that he gave me the impression of a man almost stupefied by immense misfortune.

I received him with episcopal charity, satis episcopaliter, as Augustine of St. Ambrose said, while awaiting the arrival of the persons he had requested. I sought to lift his spirits by immediately beginning a bit of conversation.

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(1) A few days earlier, Mussolini had sent word to me that he would very gladly receive a visit from me at the Prefecture. I declined the invitation, replying that I had nothing to say. Throughout my episcopate, I always refrained from going anywhere to pay a visit to the Duce, despite pressures and threats from all sides. On one occasion I received the Duce in a room of the Ambrosiana; on other occasions, in the Sacristy of the Cathedral. I always treated the Duce as a bishop should, but I refused to go to the Prefecture to pay him a visit of homage, because the cardinal's protocol, explicitly recognized by the Concordat, forbade it.

I began by assuring him that I greatly appreciated his personal sacrifice, namely, that by initiating the capitulation he was prepared to begin a life of atonement in prison or in exile, if only to save the rest of Italy from ultimate ruin. I assured him that at least honest men would recognize the value of his final act.

I did not wish to deceive him. Then, since I had reminded him of Napoleon's downfall, Mussolini observed that for him too his own second empire of a hundred days was about to expire. Nothing remained for him but to face his fate with resignation, like Bonaparte.

I assured him that the Church in Italy would not forget what he had promised to do with the Lateran Concordat; if it had not yielded all the hoped-for fruit, that of giving Italy to God and God to Italy, this was largely due to the misfortune of having been greatly betrayed by many of his own hierarchs. I had already had this told to him by his brother Arnaldo as far back as June 1931.

"Unfortunately," Mussolini said, *"men always come to know one another too late!"*

"Indeed," I replied, *"the most difficult art is that of knowing men. They never know one another well, ever."*

Continuing then on the subject of his ecclesiastical policy in recent times, he insisted greatly on excusing himself to me, declaring himself a stranger to it, even claiming to have resisted the anticlerical movement promoted by the Italian Crusade. *"Moreover,"* he added, *"I have always resisted, even when*

others sought to incite me to measures hostile to the Church and in opposition to the terms sanctioned by the Concordat."

I let that subject drop, because it did not seem to me the right moment to begin a discussion; all the more since he had already previously let me know that he held himself, Mussolini, personally responsible for everything.

Continuing the conversation and seeing him so downcast, I thought he would appreciate a word of comfort. He courteously accepted the little alchemical aphorism I said to him: *"Every misfortune, every evil can be turned into good."*

Then, recalling the destruction of the Abbey of Monte Cassino, I told him that I had felt the same deep sorrow that Saint Benedict himself must have felt when he received King Totila at Monte Cassino. Taking up that point, I asked the Duce whether he knew my recent history of Saint Benedict. He replied that he did not.

I then offered him the last copy I still had, recommending that he keep it, since it might bring him comfort in the dark days now looming on his horizon. I urged him to consider his Calvary as the expiation of his faults before God, just and merciful.

He seemed moved, and in a moment of confidential surrender, he pressed my hand with devotion. We then went on to speak of Monte Cassino and its destruction. Continuing on the religious theme, he confided to me that when he was a prisoner at Maddalena, a good priest from Pansania had undertaken to begin his re-education in the practice of the Catholic faith. He was already well advanced, and it had even been decided that

the next day he would attend Holy Mass; but on that very day he was taken away. During that imprisonment, the Duce meditated deeply on The Life of Christ by Ricciotti.

It must therefore be assumed that Mussolini was by now inclined toward a religious sense, as indeed his upbringing in his early years by his mother Rosa had led him to be.

I then reminded him that Napoleon, when he found himself on Saint Helena, drew his comfort from the faith of his forefathers. Pius VII was so generous toward him that, after having supported his cause with England, he sent to Saint Helena a priest, the Abbé Vignali, so that he might comfort him and serve as his chaplain in that solitude.

I told Mussolini that he too, in any case, should freely turn to the Holy See, which would in every possible way seek to help him. I offered, if necessary, to serve as intermediary.

The conversation had now lasted about an hour, and General Cadorna and Mr. Marazza had not yet arrived. For a moment I stepped into the anteroom to make sure; then I returned to the drawing room and asked Mussolini to wait a few more minutes. I later learned that in the meantime the C.L.N.A.I. had gathered to decide whether and how General Cadorna should respond to Mussolini's invitation.

The conversation resumed, but my interlocutor seemed extremely tired.

Once again I begged him to spare Italy a useless slaughter and to accept the honorable capitulation that had been assured to him.

He replied that his plan comprised two parts and two separate stages. First, the next day, the army and the Republican militia would be disbanded; afterward, he would withdraw into the Valtellina with a band of three thousand Blackshirts.

"So," I replied, *"you intend to continue the war in the mountains?"* The Duce assured me, *"For a little while longer, but then I shall surrender."*

I pointed out to him, *"Do not delude yourself, Duce; I know that the Blackshirts who will follow you are not three thousand, but only three hundred, whatever people may say."* He replied with a smile, *"Perhaps a few more, but not many. I have no illusions."*

Seeing him absolutely resolute in that determination, I did not press the matter further.

The conversation—still while we awaited the arrival of General Cadorna and Mr. Marazza—resumed with a sense of weariness. The Duce was not in the least excited; he seemed rather a man without willpower, going to meet his fate without reaction.

We then spoke of the firm attitude of the clergy of Northern Italy against the war and of the influence they exercised over the people.

He asked me the reason why the clergy of Northern Italy and Lombardy lived in more prosperous conditions, exercised greater influence over the population, and proved themselves superior to that of other regions of Italy.

I then explained to him the excellent intellectual and spiritual formation of the Ambrosian clergy. After twelve years in the seminary, our priests, before being placed in charge of any parish, spend another fifteen years serving as parish assistants, and only then do they present themselves for the regular parish competitions. Leaders are not improvised, nor are communities entrusted to inexperienced hands. I observed that the Duce was deeply interested in the subject and asked me from what this good discipline of the Lombard clergy originated. I then explained the reforming work of Saint Charles, whose spirit even today so deeply influences the hierarchy and the faithful that, for better or worse, all feel the duty to follow and imitate him.

Mussolini then asked me whether the Ambrosian rite, at least in its essential dogmas, was in agreement with that of the Roman Church. At this new question I felt a sense of astonishment, realizing the scant religious culture of a man who had held in his hands the destiny of Catholic Italy. I replied that it was not a matter of theological dogmas, which constitute the common heritage of the Catholic Church, but only of forms of prayer and ceremonies differing from those of the Roman rite. This ancient Ambrosian rite nonetheless exercises great educational influence over the faithful and contributes not a little to the unity of the Ambrosian clergy, which forms a single family of diligent workers under the Archbishop, who is regarded as the first laborer of the Archdiocese.

Mussolini smiled, saying that he was well aware of the ecclesiastical position of the Cardinal of Milan.

From the Ambrosian rite, we then passed to a discussion of the Slavic East, and the Duce asked me for some explanation

concerning the Russian Orthodox. I replied that Jesus Christ founded His one Church upon the rock of Saint Peter, to whom He entrusted the keys of the heavenly kingdom. Outside this rock, one may indeed build state institutions as splendid as one pleases, but they will never be the true Church of Christ, and will therefore be subject to the inevitable conditions and vicissitudes of all human institutions.

At this point Mussolini mentioned to me the unfriendly disposition of the Patriarchate of Moscow toward the Vatican. I replied that the separation of the Eastern Churches from Rome represented a true dogmatic revolution against the most sacred and ancient traditions of their holy Fathers and of the venerable councils of the early Christian East. Their Fathers had once hailed Rome as the divine bulwark of the Orthodox Faith.

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From Russia, the conversation passed to the Western Front and to England, whose genius and skill Mussolini first praised sine ira et studio. *"Imagine,"* he said to me, *"in the face of fifteen million German soldiers fallen in battle, and of many millions of Russians sacrificed in combat, England has lost only 260,000 Englishmen and about 300,000 soldiers from her vast dominions! England knows well the secrets of commerce: she has spared her men."*

Explaining his thought on English policy more fully, Mussolini recalled an old definition: *"England is like a ship anchored in Great Britain, but always ready to sail into the vast ocean."*

After the present war, the Duce believed that for many years the phenomenon of militarism would not be renewed, since Germany was no longer in any condition to wage war.

I then told him of a conversation I had had with Pius XI about ten years earlier. While I was expressing to the Pope my fears of a new European conflict, he replied, reminding me of Napoleon's saying: "To make war, one needs above all money."

"Now," the Pope concluded, "Italy has no money, and therefore Mussolini will never make war."

"Unfortunately, he was no prophet!," the Duce replied. *"War can indeed be waged without money, but never without men and without raw materials. At present, Germany, through the Allies' conquest, possesses neither one nor the other; thus, for many years, she is incapable of renewing a war."*

I then mentioned Russia, which had now penetrated into the heart of Europe.

"Unfortunately," he added, *"England has departed from her traditional policy, allowing Russia to gain predominance even in the West. That is the new, real, and great danger."*

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Meanwhile, I was informed by my secretary that General Cadorna and Mr. Marazza had arrived. I then concluded my conversation with the Duce, reminding him that one day history would record that he, in order to save Northern Italy, had himself taken the road to Saint Helena, sparing Lombardy from

ruin. I urged him nonetheless to place his trust in God, who is a good Father to all.

Mussolini replied: *"History? You speak to me of history. I believe only in ancient history, that which is written without passion, and long afterward. I do not believe in books or in the daily press."*

I agreed, observing that it is indeed difficult to judge one's contemporaries with impartial serenity.

I therefore recalled Saint Jerome, who, in his book On Ecclesiastical Writers, when speaking of Saint Ambrose, refused to pass judgment on his literary works, lest it be attributed either to jealousy or to flattery.

The entrance of the representatives of the two opposing parties interrupted our intimate conversation.

Mussolini carefully placed my History of Saint Benedict into an envelope and set it before him on the table.

The political discussion then began, which others have already recounted, at least in its broad outlines.

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I made as if to withdraw, not wishing to take part in such political meetings. The Duce, however, urged me to remain, and it was for the best; otherwise, there was no small danger that the meeting might have ended with revolver shots there in the halls of the Archbishop's Palace.

I remained seated on the central sofa, to Mussolini's right, but limited myself to listening and keeping silent, wishing to stay entirely apart from political disputes.

At first, the two sides stood rigidly opposed to one another. The Duce asked Cadorna what his demands were, but Cadorna turned the question back, remarking that it was he who had been summoned.

The discussion then became more animated, and the Committee of National Liberation, while demanding from the Duce unconditional and unqualified surrender, undertook to observe the following conditions requested by Mussolini:

1. The army and Fascist militias, including the X^{a} MAS, the Muti Squads, and others, upon surrendering their arms, would be taken prisoner with corresponding military honors, in accordance with the international conventions of The Hague. The generals and officers would not be personally disarmed.
2. The families of Fascists, as such, would not be subjected to any harassment.
3. The diplomatic corps would be treated according to international law.

These conditions seemed to satisfy the Duce, who saw his requests accepted with chivalrous generosity.

At this point, however, General Graziani stood up and said to his chief that it was not permissible to enter into any capitulation independently of the Germans, so as not to repeat the betrayal of September 8.

It was a moment of surprise! The entire long discussion suddenly became pointless.

It was then observed by several of those present that the German authorities, through the mediation of the Archbishop of Milan, had already successfully completed the negotiations for capitulation. Professor Dr. D. Bicchierai, in the Archbishop's antechamber, had disclosed the secret to them as a matter already settled, for which only the signatures were still awaited.

I, who until then had remained silent, felt a sense of embarrassment.

Since I had been mentioned, and being unable to deny the report, yet anxious above all to save the Fatherland — which the objection raised by General Graziani still placed in grave danger — I declared first of all that I deplored the indiscretion. Nevertheless, as it was now useless and harmful to continue keeping that war secret, I admitted that General Wolff was in negotiation with me through the German Consul General and Colonel Rauff.

At this point, Father Bicchierai was brought in, and he stated explicitly: *"Yes, the Germans have confirmed their acceptance of the surrender, but they have not yet signed, promising to complete the signing within 24 hours."* By midday of that same day, the German troops in Milan had laid down their arms in

the hands of the Archbishop, confining themselves within their barracks. The surrender, as General Wolff had declared, was being made into the hands of the Cardinal of Milan, because their military honor prevented them from recognizing General Cadorna and the other authorities.

Mussolini then burst out indignantly: *"They have always treated us like servants, and in the end they have betrayed me!"*

That belated declaration reminded me of another remark that Mussolini had once made to me about the Führer.

It was about a dozen years ago, and I was conversing with the Head of Government in the sacristy of the Milan Cathedral.

Among other things, I brought to his attention the situation of the Catholic Church in Germany, asking him to use his personal influence on Hitler to put an end to that persecution.

Mussolini replied to me: *"I am sorry, but on that matter I can do absolutely nothing. In Hitler's head there are three nails driven in: anti-Semitism, Nazism, and hatred of Catholicism."*

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THE GERMAN CONSUL GENERAL OFFICE IN MILAN OF THE REICH PLENIPOTENTIARY IN ITALY

Milan, May 10, 1945

Your Eminence,

I address Your Eminence at this tragic moment for my homeland, in my capacity as Consul of Germany — now defeated and deprived of its rights — to invoke, in the name of Christian Charity, the protection of the Church for my compatriots, who are now without defense in their misfortune and at the mercy of all manner of arbitrariness.

I draw the courage to do so from the fact, known to Your Eminence, that during my service in Milan, which lasted five months, as well as during the nearly four years I spent in Florence — particularly from September 1943 onwards — I have always done everything within my limited strength, despite the great difficulties and dangers known to you, to serve Justice: to secure the release of innocent prisoners, to prevent bloodshed, to halt the forced deportation of Italian workers, to improve the treatment of Italian internees and laborers and obtain the repatriation of the sick among them, to protect Italian works of art, and to ensure the provisioning of the population.

I am of the opinion that every injustice or crime committed must be judged and punished according to law. Yet if, after the terrible events of the past six years of war, Hope, Faith, and

Charity — those three cardinal points of the Christian religion — are once more to begin burning in the hearts of European men, then the acts of hatred and vengeance, which accompany every revolution and so often strike innocent victims, must soon come to an end. Thus, the great Word of Jesus Christ — "Love thy neighbor as thyself" — which contains the essence of all Christianity, must once again become the motto of suffering humanity.

Since carrying out my diplomatic activity at the Holy See during the last Holy Year, I have increasingly observed the educational influence of the Catholic Church upon souls. And I am firmly convinced that, in this moment of chaos and despair which has affected so much of German youth, hearts are now open to the consoling and healing Word of the Church. The words Peace and Justice, pronounced by the Catholic Church with strength and holy passion, at this moment which will not return again, will reach the ears of the whole world.

Confident that Your Eminence will share this thought and make every effort to realize it through the respect and moral authority enjoyed by the Catholic Church,
I have the honor to remain

Your Eminence's most devoted servant.

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Such a frank declaration astonished me, making me realize how little the two future champions of the Axis truly esteemed one another.

(*"In the end, they have betrayed me!"*) the Duce replied forcefully. "From this very moment, I declare that I am resuming my freedom of action with regard to Germany. I shall now return to the Prefecture and, by telephone, make an official announcement of it to the German Consul General."

To avert a diplomatic incident which might have prompted the Germans to deny the negotiations — already on the verge of being signed — and perhaps have driven them to a desperate defense of their positions in Lombardy, I pointed out to the Duce that one ought not to take the Germans on a point of honor. Moreover, the document of surrender had not yet been signed; he could not, at that stage, reproach them with a formal act of treason.

"It makes no difference," Mussolini replied. *"To have initiated negotiations without my knowledge already constitutes a betrayal."*

General Graziani then tried to calm the Duce, and discussion resumed on the conditions of surrender. Even the Marshal of Italy withdrew his earlier objection.

At last the Duce asked the Committee for an hour to deliberate, and it was granted to him. Then Mussolini left the room, followed by his entourage. He was holding in his hand my History of Saint Benedict.

I accompanied him as far as the antechamber of the Cardinal's apartment. He returned my greeting, but without any special interest. He was too preoccupied with the unfolding events.

As he descended the staircase, I detained General Graziani for a moment and urged him to prevent Mussolini from doing anything rash that might once again expose Lombardy to becoming the target of German wrath. The Marshal of Italy promised me that he would do everything possible to ensure that the surrender took place peacefully and in accordance with the terms of the agreement. I had already previously instructed my secretaries to have a room prepared that night in the Archbishop's Palace for Mussolini, whom I supposed would remain there as a prisoner of war under the usual international guarantees sanctioned at The Hague.

After General Graziani's departure, I returned to the audience hall, where the representatives of the various parties and the other members of the Action Committee were still in discussion. I bade them farewell, intending to take my leave courteously, but they asked me to remain. I consented, though reluctantly. My mission was by then concluded.

After an hour and a quarter, they insisted by telephone that Mussolini give his answer, or return to the Archbishop's Palace for the act of surrender.

To our great surprise, we were told from the Prefecture that the Duce had already left Milan and had even ordered that a negative reply be given in his name!

The newspapers of the following day then described in detail the final events of his sad odyssey.

Had he heeded my counsel, rather than that of his closest advisers, together with Milan and Lombardy — which capitulation would have spared the guerrilla warfare of those last days — he would above all have spared himself and his hierarchs.

The history of the liberation of Northern Italy from German occupation might perhaps have taken on an entirely different character, and at the table of the future peace we could have frankly played this card: *The Lombard people, with the help of God, did not await the Allies, but liberated themselves. Therefore, they are not to be counted among the conquered and the vanquished, but among the victors.*